

An Evaluation of American English File Series

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Abstract

Textbooks play a pivotal role in language learning classrooms. The problem is that among a wide range of textbooks in market which is appropriate for a specific classroom and a group of learners. In order to evaluate ELT textbooks theorists and writers have offered different kinds of evaluative frameworks based on a number of principles and criteria. This study evaluates a series of ELT textbook, namely, *American English File* by the use of Littlejohn's (1998) evaluative framework to see what explicit features of the book are, what pedagogic values it has, whether it is in line with its claimed objectives, and what its merits and demerits are. Littlejohn believes that we should evaluate a textbook based on its own pedagogic values and we should see what is in it not what teacher and evaluators think must exist in it. Consequently his framework is claimed to be devoid of any impressionistic ideas and it is in-depth and objective rather than being subjective. Nine ELT experts and ten ELT teachers helped the researcher rate the evaluative checklists. The results of the study show that although a number of shortcomings and drawbacks were found in *American English File*, it stood up reasonably well to a detailed and in-depth analysis and that its pedagogic values and positive attributes far out-weighed its shortcomings. The internal consistency between ratings was computed via the statistical tool of Cronbach's alpha that indicated a desirable inter-rater reliability.

Keywords: ELT textbook, Littlejohn's framework, American English File series.

1. Introduction

Textbooks are really crucial in today's language teaching and learning. Although there might be some disagreements in using textbooks in ELT classes, most of the people dealing with education, teaching, and learning substantiate the importance of textbooks in ELT classes. For instance,

according to Toms (2004), supporters of text books argue that it is the most effective way of presenting materials, it helps to reach a format and skeleton through which learners will be able to achieve a sense of system, cohesion and progress, and teacher preparation. Moreover, the selection of a particular core textbook signals an

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executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial, and even political investment (Sheldon, 1988).

Ansary and Babaii (2002) list the following arguments for the textbooks:

- a textbook is a framework which regulates and times the programs,
- in the eyes of learners, no textbook means no purpose,
- without a textbook, learners think their learning is not taken seriously,
- in many situations, a textbook can serve as a syllabus,
- a textbook provides ready-made teaching texts and learning tasks,
- a textbook is a cheap way of providing learning materials,
- a learner without a textbook is out of focus and teacher-dependent, and perhaps of utmost importance and,
- for novice teachers, a textbook means security, guidance, and support.

In the literature of textbook evaluation many different schemes and checklists have been offered by different writers and evaluators. In this vein, this paper is concerned with carrying out an evaluation on a series of ELT materials, namely *American English File* via Littlejohn's framework (1998). I have chosen Littlejohn's framework in my paper because he believes "what is required is a framework which separates assumptions about what is suitable from an analysis of the materials". His framework seeks to evaluate the selected textbook irrespective of how it is used in the classroom. He mentions it as analyzing the materials as it is, a set of materials can be used quite differently in different contexts based on the knowledge, abilities, and preferences of different teachers. This framework, thus, is claimed to be devoid of impressionistic criteria about what is desirable in a set of materials. By analyzing the individual activities (tasks) in detail and by studying

the important features of the book, this framework is claimed to be in-depth and objective rather than subjective.

This study tried to answer the following questions with reference to *American English File* series:

1. What are the explicit features of *American English File* series?
2. What pedagogic values does *American English File* series have?
3. Is *American English File* series able to fulfill the objectives claimed to be set for them?
4. What are the merits and demerits of *American English File* series?

2. METHOD

2.1. Selected Framework

This study was theoretically based on Littlejohn's (1998) framework. As he claims, the framework tries to be *in-depth* and *objective* rather than subjective by analyzing the individual activities in detail and based on important features. Thus, he has considered following questions as the basis of his framework:

1. What aspects of materials should we examine?
2. How can we examine the materials?
3. How can we relate our findings to our own teaching context?

In this part Littlejohn states that his framework consists of two main sections namely *publication* and *design* to focus on "methodology" of the material and their "context". As he puts it, *publication* relates to the "tangible" or physical aspects of the materials and how they appear as a complete set or book. The second section in the framework, *design* (following Richards and Rodgers proposal 1986) relates to the thinking underlying the materials. Here we deal with such issues as the aims, principles of selection, principle of sequencing, subject matter and focus of subject matter in which they draw on the learner's process competence

(knowledge, affect, abilities, skills), participation (who does what with whom), learner roles, teacher roles and finally role of materials as a whole.

2.2. Participants

Participants of this study consisted of 19 persons including nine ELT experts and ten EFL teachers. ELT experts were asked to help in this study to complete TAS checklist. Teachers were asked to work on one of the checklists that was developed for evaluating the design of selected textbook. Each of these teachers had at least one year (note that *American English File* series has just introduced to Iranian EFL institutions) experience of teaching textbooks under analysis.

2.3. Materials

The materials of the study were *American English File* series which is a five-level English course for adults and young adults. 12% of the total materials was extracted as a sample these books. Littlejohn argues that “I have found it is useful to analyze about 10% to 15% of the total material”. (p. 196). This sample included five units, the middle unit of each book. Each unit of *American English File* series is composed of four sections plus two-page practical English and writing, and a two-page review & check section. The sample contained 522 tasks. Each task was labeled by a number that was applied in task analysis sheets.

2.4. Instruments

A checklist was developed in order to examine the explicit features of *American English File* series. This checklist, (appendix A), was based on Littlejohn’s framework. As Littlejohn directed in his framework according to the nature of the materials under evaluation some minor changes was applied, the general format was in accordance with the framework though.

There was another checklist based on Littlejohn’s framework (appendix B) under the title of *Task Analysis Sheet* (TAS). This

checklist examines the activities and tasks in one typical unit of each textbook. The Task Analysis Sheet includes three main sections 1. What is the learner expected to do? 2. Who with? and 3. With what content? Each section has also several subsections.

The first section examines the materials according to three aspects: A. Turn take (initiate, response, and/or not required); B. Focus on (language system, meaning, and/or meaning-system relationship); and C. Mental operation (retrieve form long-term memory, select information, draw on prior knowledge, relate sound to objects, compare, etc.)

In the second section three possible situations are checked: learner to class, learner individually simultaneously, learners in pairs/groups.

The third section is also divided to following parts: A. input to learner, B. expected output from learners, C. Source, and D. Nature.

There was also a third checklist (appendix C) developed based on claims declared by the authors of *American English File* series and Richards and Rodgers notion of design, as is mentioned in Littlejohn’s framework, to seek participants’ ideas about some number of 30 statements. These statements were categorized according to following nine sections of design part in Littlejohn’s framework:

1. Aims and objectives
2. Principles of selection
3. Principles of sequencing
4. Subject mater and focus of subject matter
5. Types of teaching/learning activities
6. Participation: who does what with whom?
7. Classroom roles of teachers and learners
8. Learner roles in learning
9. Role of materials as a whole

2.5. Data collection

The checklist developed to examine the explicit features of *American English File* series was worked on by the researcher himself because as Littlejohn puts it, this checklist is dealt with tangible or physical aspects of the materials and there will not be any disagreement among different evaluators about the results provided by this checklist.

The second checklist (TAS) was offered to nine ELT experts as raters. It is worth mentioning here that this checklist, proposed by Littlejohn, is developed in a way that can be worked on by even one rater. Here in order to enhance the reliability of evaluation these nine experts were asked to help to evaluate the materials. Due to the wide range of tasks it was impossible to expect each rater analyzes all 522 tasks lonely. Therefore, the tasks were divided to three categories each category involved 174 tasks which was given to three ELT experts; altogether there were nine raters and 522 tasks. Each three raters was provided with a sample of 174 tasks and checklists to work on. Before starting the job, a brief description of total material (number of units in each textbook, the sequence and patterns of activities, the number of textbooks in each level, components, etc.) was presented to the raters to have a general idea about the *American English File* series. Of course the organization, materials, and sequence of activities in *American English File* series textbooks is in such a way that it repeat in every unit. In this regard there seemed not to be any critical differences considering the organization and sequence of activities between total amount of materials and our sample.

The third checklist then was handed to ten teachers with experience in teaching American English. Teachers helped us at this part because of their experience of teaching these books they had an idea about

the whole material, not just the sample. In this case if, possibly, there were any partial differences between our sample and the total materials it would not be hidden from these experienced teachers' points of view.

2.6. Data Analysis

For the first checklist a report on explicit features of *American English File* series is provided in the results section. Regarding TAS checklist after analyzing each expert's ratings, using statistical procedures and SPSS software, frequency counts and percentage indexes were reported for individual features listed in task analysis sheets. In addition, in order to examine the internal consistency between nine ELT experts' ratings the statistical tool of Cronbach's alpha was utilized and indicated the inter-rater reliability is desirable between ratings (0.89).

There was performed an analysis for third checklist (Design) in order to find an agreed view on each of sections mentioned in Littlejohn's framework. By the use of statistical procedure a general percentage indexes was reported for subcategories of this checklist then percentage index of each question was reported as well. Also the inter-rater reliability between ten EFL teachers' ratings was computed through the statistical tool of Cronbach's alpha and showed a desirable consistency (0.87).

3. Results

As Table 1 shows, nearly half (53.65%) of the tasks in *American English File* expect the learners to "respond". The rest of the tasks include 32.15% "initiation" and 14.3% "the tasks that do not require learners to initiate or respond". These results show that the *American English File* tasks more often encourage students to use the language and more importantly they often require them to express themselves rather than be a listener.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage for Turn-Take

Turn take	Frequency	Percentage
Initiate	538	32.15%
Respond	896	53.55%
Not required	239	14.3%
Total	1673	100%

According to the Table 2 it can be concluded that tasks in *American English File* mainly focus on meaning considering that about half of the tasks just focus on meaning and 27.36% of them focus on both form and meaning. This can be interpreted as *American English File* tries to enhance comprehension by the use of the tasks that draw students' attention more to the meaning of the language than its form.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage for Focus

Focus on	Frequency	Percentage
Language System (rules and form)	436	25.44%
Meaning	809	47.2%
Meaning/ System relationship	469	27.36%
Total	1714	100%

Different mental operation may be used while the learners participate in language learning tasks. As Table 3 shows the tasks in *American English File* demand all the ten mental operation in order to be accomplished. "Decode semantic meaning" is used slightly more than other operations (17.1%). It can be seen from the Table that *American English File* provides learners with activities that give them the opportunity to infer the meaning of the texts that accompany applying language rule, recalling previous learning, and using prior linguistic knowledge which can be related and applied in new tasks and activities. *American English File* pays less attention to

repetition with expansion that reveals the fact that it does not require students to learn English through a lot of repetition.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage for Mental Operation

Mental operation	Frequency	Percentage
Retrieve from LT memory	333	13.3%
Built text	215	8.6%
Draw on prior knowledge	309	12.4%
Relate sounds to objects	126	5.1%
Compare	158	6.3%
Decode semantic meaning	428	17.1%
Select information	233	9.3%
Repeat with expansion	118	4.7%
Deduce language rule	210	8.4%
Apply language rule	372	14.8%
Total	2502	100%

This section of TAS seeks to find the kind of interaction occurring between the students and class or teacher while they are accomplishing a task. As can be seen in the Table 4 and graph 4 activities which require students to accomplish a task individually simultaneously compose 52.4% of total tasks in the series. In conclusion we can see that the authors of *American English File* in spite of giving much importance to group activities in the process of learning have given importance to tasks that involves learners into activities that should be done individually simultaneously.

Table 4. *Frequency and percentage for Who with?*

Who with	Frequency	Percentage
Learner to class	420	25.47%
Learner individually simultaneously	864	52.4%
Learner in pairs/groups	365	22.13%
Total	1649	100%

This section of TAS examines another important aspect of a task in a textbook. "Input to the learners", "Expected output from learners" and "Source" are subsections of this part whose analysis results are presented separately in tables and graphs.

As Table 5 shows written words/phrases have dominant source of input (31.80%). Although the series pays great attention to writing form of input, it does not have a satisfactory amount of graphic source of input which is as important as writing in encouraging and motivating learners.

Table 5. *Frequency and percentage for Input to learners*

Input to Learners	Frequency	Percentage
Graphic	208	10.10%
Oral word/phrases	336	16.30%
Oral extended discourse	259	12.50%
Written word/phrases	658	31.80%
Written extended discourse	315	15.20%
Sound/music	290	14.10%
Total	2066	100%

3.1. Expected Output from Learners

As the Table 6 shows, the most attention has been paid to oral words and phrases (40.70%) while written extended discourse

has the least proportion of output in the tasks (11.10%). In conclusion, we can understand from the table and graph that *American English File* pays more attention to oral form of output which is used in every day conversations and communications. For the written form of output it mostly focuses on structures at words and phrases level rather than extended form.

Table 6. *Frequency and percentage for Expected output from learners*

Who with	Frequency	Percentage
Learner to class	420	25.47%
Learner individually simultaneously	864	52.4%
Learner in pairs/groups	365	22.13%
Total	1649	100%

3.2. Source

TAS examines three possible sources of the content for lessons and their activities. The content of lessons is provided whether by the materials, by the learners, or by the teachers. As Table 7 and graph 7 show the textbook provides a great amount of materials and contents for lessons itself (64.10%). It seems the series demands teachers to be abided by their guide book and other components.

Table 7. *Frequency and percentage for Source*

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Materials	1081	64.10%
Teacher	117	6.90%
Learner	489	29.00%
Total	1687	100%

3.3. Nature

In this section of analysis the type of content which is the focus of the learning activity is studied. As Table 8 shows, Fact is more frequent in total tasks (40.20%),

butfiction has the least frequency in nature tasks (3.70%).In fact, in the series it is endeavored to design tasks in a way that expose students in authentic contexts through using their own information an opinions.

Table 8. Frequency and percentage for Nature

Nature	Frequency	Percentage
Personal opinion	317	16.40%
Fact	776	40.20%
Fiction	71	3.70%
Personal information	393	20.40%
Metalinguistic knowledge	372	19.30%
Total	1929	100%

The second section in Littlejohn’s framework, Design, relates to the thinking underlying the materials. This part involves consideration of areas such as the apparent aims of the materials, how the tasks, language and content in the materials are selected and sequenced etc. The results of the study of the design can help evaluator to see to what extent the materials developers have been successful in achieving their claimed goals.

As the Table 9 shows the selected textbook obtained 60% of the optimum score (90 out of 150) for aims and objectives part. Principles of selection acquired 58% of the optimum score (87 out of 200). Principle of sequencing received 41.6% of optimum score (83.2 out of 150). The obtained score for subject matter and focus of subject matter was 62% of the optimum score (144 out of 200) which seem to be rather high. Types of teaching/ learning activities obtained 32.4% of optimum scores (81 out of 250). Participation received 35.2% of optimum scores (52.8 out of 150). The next score was obtained by classroom roles of teachers and learners which was 40.4% of optimum

proportion (80.8 out of 200). Learner role in learning obtained 46% of optimum scores (92 out of 200) and finally the role of materials as a whole received 41.6% of optimum scores (124.8 out of 300). In conclusion we can see that the scores of the statements related to theauthors’ claims are high which can be a sign of success for the authors of the series.

Table 9. Total score and proportion percentage for Design

Design	Total	Percentage
1.Aims & Objectives	90	60%
2.Principles of selection	87	58%
3. Principle of sequence	83.2	41.6%
4. Subject matter and focus of subject matter	144	62%
5. Types of teaching/ learning activities	81	32.4%
6. Participation	52.8	32.2%
7. Classroom roles of teachers and learners	80.8	40.4%
8. Learner roles in learning	92	46%
9. Role of the materials as a whole	124.8	41.6%

4. Conclusion

As mentioned before, there is no disagreement among researchers and evaluators about the explicit features of a textbook because, as Littlejohn stated, they are related to the tangible or physical aspects of the materials and how they appear as a complete set or book. Thus the explicit features of *American English File* are those mentioned in result section based on the results of applying Littlejohn’s checklists.

American English File’s pedagogical values are as follow:

I. According to the results of the study (Table 4.3.1.1.1) it was revealed that the tasks in *American English File* series more often encourage the students to use the language and focusesmore on involvement

of the learners in the classroom activities.

II. The results of this study (Table 4.3.1.2.1) revealed that *American English File* series mostly tries to draw on meaning as the basis for the learning task which is adjusted with the authors' claims.

III. Based on the results of the study (Table 4.3.1.3.1) it is revealed that *American English File*'s tasks demand all the ten examined mental operations in order to be accomplished. *American English File* provides students with tasks that give the opportunity to infer the meaning of the texts that accompany applying language rule, recalling previous learning, and using prior linguistic knowledge which can be related and applied in new tasks and activities. These characteristics give the textbook more consistency and continuity. *American English File* pays less attention to repetition with expansion that reveals the fact that it does not require students to learn English through a lot of repetition.

IV. According to (Table 4.3.2.1) *American English File* pays more attention to tasks that involves learners into activities that should be done individually simultaneously rather than group activities.

V. The study also shows that (Table 4.3.3.1.1) *American English File* has provided different types of input to learners among which paying attention to written word/phrases form of input are considerable. Graphic received the least proportion of the total source of input while it could help students to learn and memorize new materials more easily and also makes the textbook lively and motivates students to study it more enthusiastically

VI. One of the pedagogic values of *American English File* series according to the results of this study (Table 4.3.3.2.1) is its attention to the oral word/phrases form of expected output from the learners.

VII. The results of the study also revealed that (Table 4.3.3.3.1) for the majority of

tasks and activities the textbook itself specifies its own texts as the source of content. *American English File* tasks provide a great variety of contents from different sources which contain systematic practice of practical language such as: how to ask for directions, how to request services at a hotel, airport etc.

Furthermore, *American English File* provides content to help students develop a cultural fluency by creating and awareness of the varied rules across cultures for issues like politeness, greetings and introductions, etc.

VIII. According to the results of this study (Table 4.3.3.4.1) it was understood that fact is more frequent in total tasks while fiction has the least frequency in nature tasks. The tasks in *American English File* are of various nature and almost every kinds of task nature is included in the series. Metalinguistic knowledge helps learners arrive at knowledge of forms structure and other aspects of language through reflecting and analyzing the language.

As Design evaluation results shows the evaluators believe *American English File* is appropriate and successful in its design. In addition, based on the all pedagogic values discussed above we can confirm the success of *American English File* series.

Based on the results of evaluations, following are the merits of *American English File* series:

I. The price of *American English File* student's book with workbook and CD-ROM is reasonable comparing to other ELT textbooks on market. It is also easily available and learners can find it without trouble.

II. *American English File* tasks more often encourage students to use the language and require them to express themselves rather than be a listener.

III. *American English File* tasks enhance comprehension by the use of the activities that draw Student's attention more to

meaning of the language than its form.

IV. *American English File* tasks demand a variety of mental operation from the learners. It facilitates the process of learning.

V. Expected output from learners is mostly in the form of oral words/phrases and extended discourse that helps student attain fluency and self confidence for everyday oral communications.

The demerits of *American English File* series are as follow:

I. The majority of tasks in *American English File* require learners to respond and a much smaller proportion requires them to initiate using the language. This is not desirable if we want to have an active class.

II. The tasks which require learners to repeat the learning points with expansion have not been included as many as other kinds of tasks. III. The amount of pairs/groups work activities that help learners to practice language more naturally are not satisfactory in *American English File* series.

IV. Written extended discourse form of output is also not considered enough in *American English File* tasks that is a drawback for an ELT textbook.

Although a number of shortcomings and drawbacks were found in *English File* series, the results of the study seemed to reveal that this particular ELT textbook stood up reasonably well to a detailed and in-depth analysis and that its pedagogic values and positive attributes far outweighed the demerits. Both experts and teachers evaluation results showed that *American English File* series are in line with the goals set by its authors. Of course teachers of English language who teach the series are suggested to consider the shortcomings and try to alleviate or compensate for these drawbacks by supplementing, modifying and adapting problematic aspects of the textbook.

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